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Participatory Learning Through the Call and Response

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Introduction

Wherever adult education takes place, the purpose is to learn. To assist adults in the learning process, it is suggested that a variety of techniques be used. Techniques that allow for participatory or interactive learning are most favored because they allow learners to be engaged in the learning process. One of the most popular participatory instructional techniques in the classroom is the discussion. Within the African American Church, participatory learning occurs through an interesting dialogue called the “call and response.” Costen (1993) suggests that the call and response is a dialogical communication that skillfully takes place between the preacher and the congregation. The purpose of this study was to examine the techniques preachers use to engage adults in the learning process during a worship service.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected by observing and listening to sermons in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. The sermons were from African American pastors who preached to predominately African American congregations. Since many churches record their worship services with audio and/or visual tapes, when possible audiotapes of the worship services were purchased to further facilitate the understanding of the call and response techniques used. Sermons were analyzed using content analysis. As such, frequencies of certain actions or words and phrases used during the worship experience were identified.

Findings and Conclusion

The findings resulted in four techniques that the African American preachers used. They were *Neighboring*, *Closed Inquiry*, *Ellipsing*, and *Appeal and Action*. *Neighboring* was found to be a popular technique among the preachers. In using this technique, the preacher required a congregant to repeat a phrase to a person he or she was sitting adjacent to. *Closed Inquiry* was a technique used that required a simple one word response, generally “yes,” to a question posed to the congregation by the preacher. *Ellipsing* invoked a verbal response by the congregation that completed a sentence or phrase begun by the pastor. *Appeal and Action* required the congregation to *do* something at the request of the preacher.

Although adult learning takes place in different forms and contexts, the goal is similar—the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and/or a skill. To aid adults in reaching their educational goal, educators should use different instructional techniques. These techniques should be interactive or participatory in nature. In formal settings, discussion or questioning

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techniques are often used. However, this study identified different participatory learning techniques used during the African American worship experience. Future research could examine the extent to which learning actually takes place during the worship service when the call and response is used.

References

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